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New Town

We can learn
from this
British venture

By CHESTER E. SMOLSKI
 Special to the Sunday Journal

IN 1946 when Lewis Silkin, Minister of Housing, approached Stevenage, then a quiet village of about 6,000 residents 30 miles north of London in the lovely rolling Hertfordshire countryside, he must have suspected that the villagers were not particularly anxious to hear him speak. The sign in the railway station had been changed to Silkingrad by some of the disgruntled villagers and before he was to leave he found the tires of his car deflated and some sand in the petrol tank. Stevenage was the first "new town" designated under the New Towns Act of 1946 and the Minister was there to tell the villagers what this would mean for them.

The thought of having nearly 50,000 Londoners dropped into their front gardens did not set well with the Stevenage residents, for they had had a previous experience during the war when Londoners were evacuated and then settled in at Stevenage. The villagers were happy when the Londoners returned home. But now 50,000 of them!

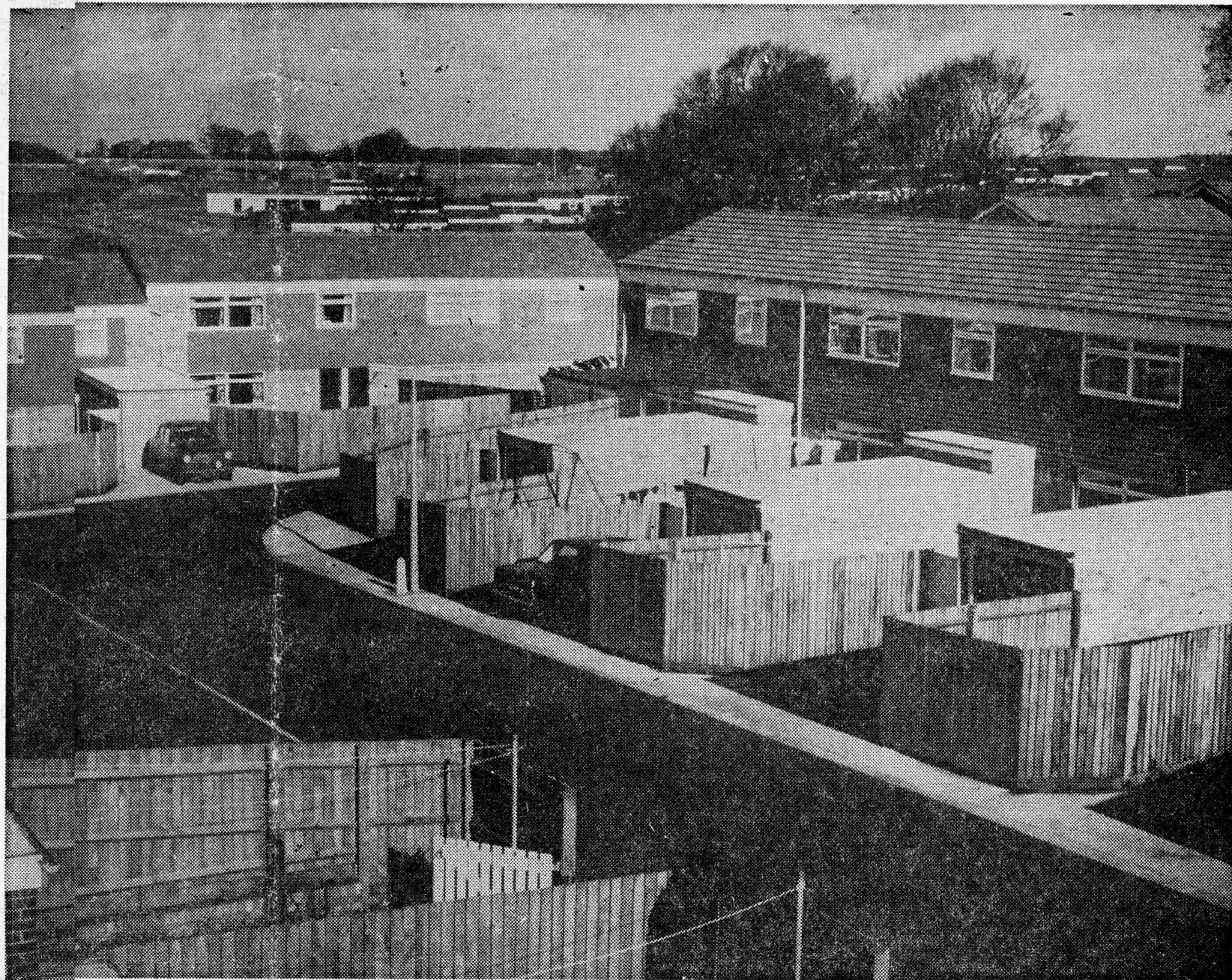
The Minister made it very clear when he said: "Like it or not, the people of London need somewhere to live and work. We have decided that Stevenage will be the first New Town, and the first New Town it will be." Shouts of "Dictator" and "Gestapo" from the crowd made it even more obvious that the residents were not at all happy at being in on the beginning of what has since become the biggest housing development movement of any country in the world: the wholesale building of complete new towns with their own schools, shops, homes, social centers, recreational areas, and their own industries.

Today, more than 4,000 visitors come each year from all over the world to see, inspect, and take pictures of Britain's first new, postwar town.

It was our good fortune to live there last year. After a month of looking for housing in London, it became quite obvious why there are about 150,000 families on the London Council housing list who are in need of homes. We were not in a position to wait eight to 10 years for a house in London, as some families do, because we were in England for only a year. But then the post brought the welcomed news that the Stevenage Development Corporation, the government-established organization which builds and runs the town until the town is able to do so itself, had a house for us. It was with happy heart that we left our "bed and breakfast" in London, loaded our Volkswagen bus with our four children and 14 pieces of luggage, and drove north along the A1 to England's best known new town, our home for the next eight months and my own laboratory because the new towns of Europe was to be my research project for the next year.

Stevenage today is a thriving community of 65,000 people with provisions for the "import" of 15,000 more Londoners, at which time importation of people will stop. Over a period of time natural growth will carry the town to its stated objective of 105,000 population.

The several pages of want ads in the local weekly paper attest to the growing industrial development of Stevenage. In fact, the SDC is in the enviable position of



'BACK YARD' in this part of Stevenage is only a small fenced area and a garage, but, open country—like everything else—is within easy walking distance of homes.

being able to choose from the waiting list of industrialists who want to move in. Aircraft parts, computers, cardboard containers and ballpoint pens indicate some of the variety of items manufactured in the town, while research laboratories and a College for Further Education also offer a special type of employment to the local residents.

To ensure that people moving to Stevenage do not add to the congestion of London by driving or taking the train into the city to work, the most important requirement for housing is that one must have a job in the town. Otherwise, one cannot live in the town. So by foot, bicycle and car, men and women are able to go home for lunch from their factories, and this they do in large numbers. Is it possible to change jobs after moving to Stevenage, to take a position back in London? The answer is yes, and some residents do—but less than three per cent of the work force. The people choose to remain in their town and work there as well.

In the early days of new town development, an observer noted that many of the families coming in were despondent and apparently unhappy with their move. This observer described the condition as "new town blues." Anyone who has moved into a new and different neighborhood can appreciate the feeling. Imagine a town in which everyone is in the same circumstance, and made up of mostly young families who had never left their old neighborhoods in London before. An unfortunate term to describe a very natural condition that anyone experiences on moving to a town, be it new or old, did leave an impression that has been difficult for the new towns to erase.

How do the people feel about the town? We talked to some who hated it, some who thought it terribly dull (what can one expect after having lived in London?), and some who thought the development corporation had no feeling for the residents in the town or exerted too much pressure on the local urban district council. On this last point it would appear that the efforts of the SDC to build a road through one of the last undeveloped parts of the town will succeed even though the urban district council and a sizable segment of the population are against it. On the other hand, when the SDC announced about 12 years ago that the town center would be built in the traditional way with shops lining the streets, the residents

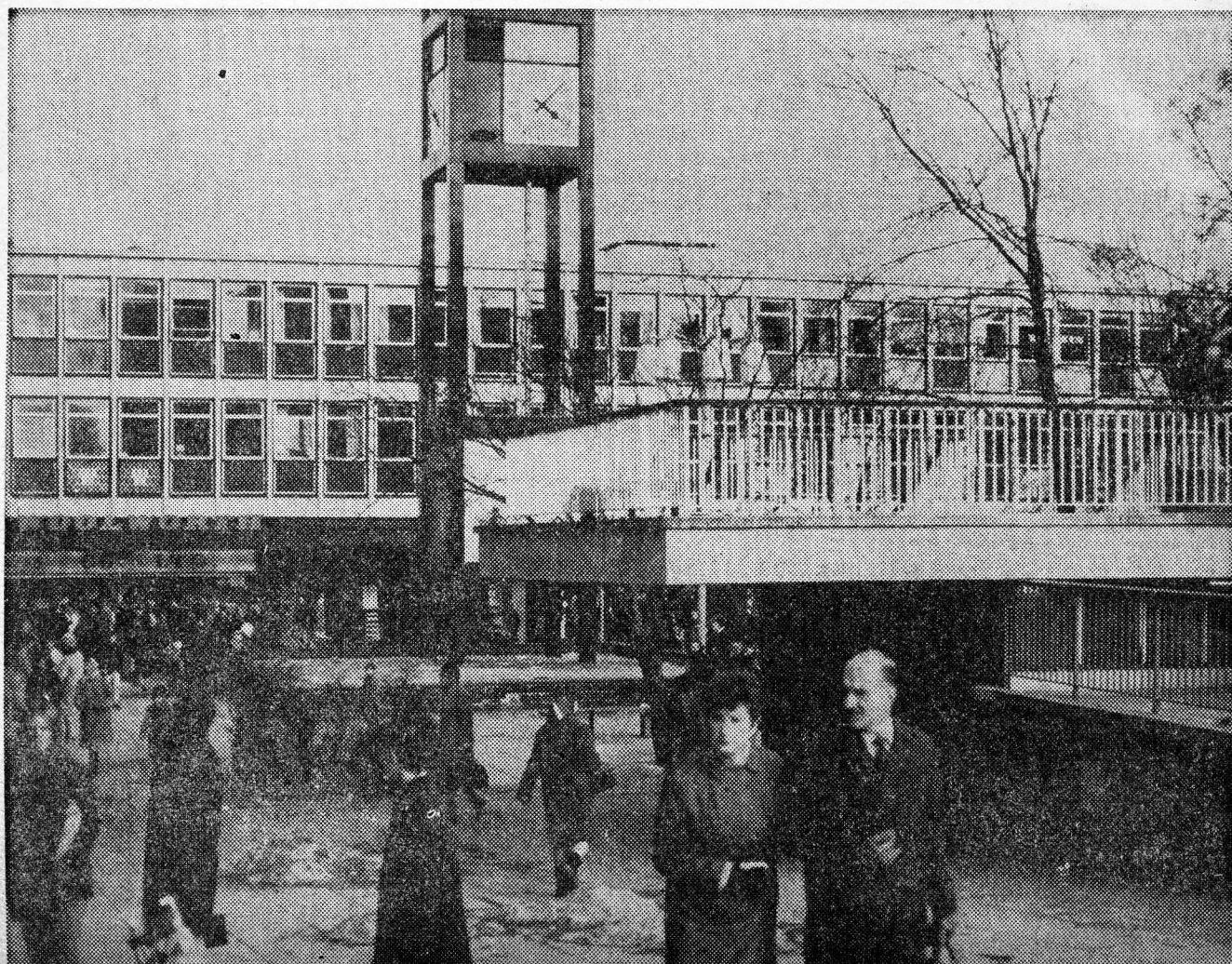
united against the planners and said they wanted a separated pedestrian-vehicular center. This battle was fought and won by the residents. Today the SDC proudly proclaims that it is the first of the new towns to have this kind of town center.

We also talked with many residents who thoroughly enjoyed the place, who thought that the opportunities for children were the finest anywhere, who have not felt the need to go back to London, and who saw this kind of development as one of the best solutions to housing problems in Britain.

For ourselves, we think about the buried utility wires, the pedestrian subways under the main streets so children can cross safely, the wide green verges, the separated pedestrian-vehicular town center, the accessibility of services so that one can walk to church, school, shopping, town center, and the green belt countryside. The Radburn type neighborhood in which we lived, and finally, the more than 300 social organizations in town, ranging from the Stevenage Musical Society to the Stevenage branch of the Communist Party.

The building of new towns is one method used by the British to help relieve the housing shortage and to provide adequate housing for low-income and middle-income families. I am not referring to the type of new town designed for upper-income families which has been built so far in this country, such as Reston, Va., where the lowest priced house available sells for more than \$29,000. Rather, I mean a Stevenage style new town where families of all incomes can live and enjoy the amenities generally found only in the very best suburban communities in this country. For this to happen here, it is necessary that there be an awareness of what a new town is, a commitment to do something about our own housing shortage, and an increased role of government in providing the money to foster this type of town development. Many of our traditions have come from Britain and it appears that we can still learn from that country's experience, even in this, the richest country of the world.

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TOWN CENTER, left, is laid out for pedestrian's convenience. At right, Mr. Smolski and his family at their Stevenage residence.

